

Rhetoric of Seduction and Seduction of Rhetoric in Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*

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Abstract

The essay analyzes the work of Paul de Man (1919-1983), in particular *Allegories of Reading*. Even though his posthumously revealed ties with Nazism reduced his academic influence, de Man is still considered the leader of Deconstruction in America, and his favorite metaphor of 'seduction' summarizes his Nietzschean theory of rhetoric as illusionism, i.e. a strategy that provoke an affective reaction, independent from logic or facts. Yet, this metaphor seems to be in contrast with other tendencies of Deconstruction, namely the self-referential, non-voluntary, autonomous status of writing, the absence of critical meta-language, the reduction of psychology in criticism.

Parole chiave

Nietzsche, Rhetoric, Seduction, Deconstruction

Contatti

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The word «seduction» recurs with impressive frequency, often twice or more in the same paragraph, in Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading*.¹ Also very frequent are expressions with the adjective «seductive», such as «seductive power» (p. 22), «seductive audacity» (p. 35), «seductive metaphors» (p. 67), «seductive tone» (p. 94), «seductive strategy» (p. 193), «seductive plays» (p. 207), «seductive vocabulary» (p. 210), «seductive similarities» (p. 239), «seductive form» (p. 262) and others. De Man's most famous collection of critical essays covers a great variety of different topics, from Rilke to Nietzsche, from Pascal to Proust: in such a variegated panorama, the theme of seduction runs through the entire book and constitutes a sort of constant. In general, the author associates the idea of seduction with rhetoric, more precisely with tropes (metaphor in particular): within the literary texts analyzed de Man stresses, on the one hand, the persuasive power of rhetoric, based on the illusions of linguistic seduction, and, on the other, the apparently more reliable power of

¹ See Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1979, pp. 15, 20, 21, 22, 24, 26, 48, 53, 55, 71, 119, 159, 184, 190, 192, 193, 200, 210. Here I will especially focus on these pages, but the recurrence of the notion of seduction characterizes also other de Man's works. See for instance *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1983 (pp. 206, 285), *The Resistance to Theory*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1986 (pp. 6, 98) *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (pp. 9, 85, 112, 115) and especially *Aesthetic Ideology*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1996 (pp. 35, 43, 54, 55, 69, 84, 180). Significantly enough, the idea of seduction is recurrent also in many critical essays on de Man. See for instance *(Dis)continuities: Essays on Paul de Man*, Luc Herman, Kris Humbeeck and Geert Lernout (eds.), Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1989, in particular pp. 85-97 (where Jan Rosiek speaks of a «fallacious seduction inherent in the linguistic condition of man», p. 90) and pp. 149-161 (where Cyrus Hamlin sees de Man's *The Resistance to Theory* as the banishment of the «persuasion by seduction», p. 153).

referential proof. According to de Man both forces are based on language: in the deconstructive critical approach of the scholar this means that they are perpetually oscillating between a figural and a grammatical dimension, their reliability being therefore illusory. Yet these powers can profoundly persuade the reader of a text, and they seem to do so in different ways. The first power, rhetoric, effects persuasion with linguistic (metaphorical, euphonic, analogical) seduction, the second power, referential proof, with rational demonstration. In various occurrences the scholar points out that the two types of force, i.e. the two types of persuasion, even though they share the same linguistic origin, and therefore even though they share the same fundamental epistemological ambiguity, exist in an opposition that cannot be reconciled.

In this paper, I will try a sort of stylistic reading of de Man's text in order to identify the presence of the theme of seduction and the contradictions that it originates. To some extent, I will privilege an inevitably limited horizontal reading, on language and style, instead of a vertical reading, on the wider theoretical and cultural implications of de Man's writings. I will try, as it were, a Demanian reading of de Man, i.e. a close rhetorical reading of his work: by focusing on a specific topic (and more precisely on a specific word, seduction), I will show how some of the scholar's texts are undermined by inner aporias.

In the second chapter of *Allegories of Reading — Tropes (Rilke)* (pp. 20-56) — de Man discusses the fact that Rainer Maria Rilke has enjoyed a considerable success even outside German-speaking countries, and even among common readers. De Man attributes this popularity in large part to the stereotypical image of Rilke as a «healer of soul» (p. 21). For the majority of his admirers the author of *The Book of Hours* or the *Duino Elegies* is a wise figure, able to access and cure the most hidden part of the human consciousness. Reading the existential vicissitudes of the poet gives the reader insight into his or her own troubles, as it were in a kind of mirror therapy. De Man, quoting a quite cynical letter from Rilke,² points out that this «intersubjective reading grounded in a common sentiment» (p. 21) is in fact the consequence of an ingenuous confusion between literature and life, between Rilke as a poet and Rilke as a biographical subject. The «phatos» (p. 21) in Rilke's apparent autobiographical confessions, the «personal seduction» (p. 22)³ that attracts a large number of readers, are in reality the consequences of a set of masterfully managed literary artifices: «It is not difficult», writes de Man, «for a reader alerted to

² «I wish to help and expected to be helped. Everyone's eternal mistake is to take me for a healer when, in fact, I am only attracting others, for my own profit, in the trap of a simulated assistance» (*Allegories*, p. 20). It is curious that de Man, who usually is a fierce opponent of any biographical method in literary analysis — see for instance what he writes in *Blindness and Insight*: «Considerations of the actual and historical existence of writers are a waste of time from a critical viewpoint» (p. 35) — uses here Rilke's letter as a biographical document and as a means in order to reach a better understanding of the poet's work.

³ Ronald Schleifer points out that «Phatos» is a recurring word in de Man [...] along with 'seduction' it is the term he uses to describe the affects of language» (*De Man, Greimas, and the Problem of Referentiality*, in *Rhetoric and Form: Deconstruction at Yale*, Robert Con Davis and Ronald Schleifer. (eds.), University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1985, p. 218). In this respect, i.e. the insistence on the emotional and affective dimension of language, de Man seems very close to Nietzsche, especially on the notes on rhetoric that the German philosopher kept for a university course during the years 1872 and 1873. In these notes Nietzsche repeatedly describes language as a system of tropes (pp. 20-21) and ancient rhetoric as a kind of phonic seduction (pp. 22-32). See also the *Discussion* that follows de Man's *Nietzsche's Theory of Rhetoric* («Symposium. A Quarterly Journal in Modern Foreign Literatures», n. 1 (1974), pp. 33-51), in which de Man lingers over the problem of the relationship between language and referent in Nietzsche.

the ambivalences of the relationship between the self and its language, to demystify this seduction» (p. 21). According to the scholar, in fact, it is not important whether or not the poet actually lived the (often negative) biographical experiences he described: these experiences, despite the psychological complicity or identification engendered in readers, are first of all the expression of a highly refined rhetorical ability. What reveals the literary, which, according to de Man's notion of literature, coincides with the rhetorically aware dimension of these apparently intimate pages is the continuous strategic aestheticism of the poet: even when facing suffering, depression, or horror, he does not forget to make use of «euphonic seductions» (p. 54) and beautiful images — «seductive surfaces» in the scholar's words (p. 23) — derived in particular from Baudelaire and from the decadent tradition.⁴

The reader is first of all fascinated by the beauty and the euphony of Rilke's words, even though they invariably involve uncanny or threatening images.⁵ Furthermore, the poet continually promises salvation through his own art. In fact, in spite of his almost obsessive negative emphasis on the fragility of human nature, on death, and on alienation, Rilke indicates in poetry a way to obtain salvation, a way that one not only can but must follow. The reader is eager to believe in this promise: it is a kind of fulfillment of a very strong psychological need. The problem raised by de Man is whether to believe the cynical Rilke of the letter — that is, the professional poet capable of using pathos only for aesthetic goals, in order to seduce readers — or whether to believe the apparently sincere, benevolent words that one finds in the German poet's books and that can be read as promises of existential salvation: «Rilke not only claims the right to state his own salvation but to impose it,» writes de Man, «as it were, on others [...]. As for deciding whether it is a legitimate promise, whether it is a *truth* or a *seduction*, the question must remain open» (*Allegories*, p. 24, emphasis added).

Rilke's readers, seduced by the apparently spontaneous pathos of Rilkean characteristic themes, may in some cases completely forget the purely rhetorical dimension of the work of art. An example is the powerful presence of intensely dramatic autobiographical elements, in which existential pathos does not necessarily have a referent in the actual poet's life. Nonetheless, as the scholar stresses, a univocal interest in form too might be a dangerous seduction from a critical viewpoint:

By suggesting that the properly poetic dimension of Rilke's work has been neglected in favor of his themes, we do not wish to return to the seduction of the forms. The question is rather whether Rilke's text turns back upon itself in a manner that puts the authority of its own affirmations in doubt, especially when these affirmations refer to the modes of writing that it advocates. (*Allegories*, p. 27)

⁴ De Man quotes: «<Lass deine Hand am Hang der Himmel ruhn / und dulde stumm, was wir dir dunkel tun>. It can easily be verified that, in this last line of verse, there appears rigorously no syllable that does not fulfil an effect of euphony» (*Allegories*, p. 31). Interestingly enough, de Man deliberately connects euphony and (the possibility of) error in the last essay of *Blindness and Insight* (p. 285).

⁵ See, for instance, what de Man says about «the seductive but funereal image of a temporal annihilation which is enjoyed as if it were a sensuous pleasure, <der Süßen Traube / des Glockenspiels> (<The sweetened cluster of grapes / of the carillon>), which actually is the death knell that reduced the city to a ghostly memory» (*Allegories*, p. 42).

Focusing on the insistence in Rilke of strongly ambiguous or paradoxical elements, such as «the hollow of the violin, the unreality of the mirrored image, the darkness of a sundial at night, the falling ball, the missing eye» (*Allegories*, cit., p. 44), de Man points out that, especially for oxymoronic images such as the sundial at night, «the seductions of the syntax and of the figuration have to make even the most extreme paradoxes appear natural» (*Allegories*, cit., p. 53). In other words the poet, by means of his literary mastery, seems often able to create a pure, and seductive, rhetorical space, free of any constraint for referential meaning or logical proof, as if poetic rhetorically well articulated metaphors were free from anygnoseological or epistemological reliability grounded on common experience.

In the ninth chapter of *Allegories of Reading, Allegory (Julie)* (pp. 188-220), on Jean-Jacques Rousseau, de Man uses the same notion of seduction in order to analyze the Swiss writer's work. The analogies with the essay on Rainer Maria Rilke, discussed above, are various, both from the point of view of the general theoretical approach and from the point of view of the specific analysis of the text. First, as he did in his Rilke essay, the scholar alerts the readers. Speaking of Rousseau's novel *Julie* (p. 189), de Man warns that, despite what one reads in the numerous, popular biographical studies on the writer, one should not confuse life and literature. In fact, Rousseau, like Rilke, is capable both of a «seduction of [...] reflective inwardness» (p. 190) and of «the seductive plays of the signifier» (p. 207). Biographical anecdotes about Rousseau as a man, including details about his sentimental life, his habits, his oddities, are fallacious since, according to de Man, common words such as «love» or «man» are just metaphors that confer «the illusion of proper meaning to a suspended, open semantic structure» (*Allegories*, p. 198); yet, despite their allegorical abstractness or referential inconsistency, they seduce the readers because of their supposed referential status.⁶ Few scholars, de Man argues, have been able to resist their draw. As in the case of Rilke, human needs (either psychological or physical, because psychic fulfillment cannot be separated from physical pleasure) allow the seduction to be so powerful, not only for his readers but also for Rilke himself. We need, de Man seems to suggest, these very illusory and generic metaphors (man, love, state, and so on) as we need such elementary things as food or shelter.⁷ If, as stated by de Man, «our entire social language is an intricate system of rhetorical devices designed to escape from the direct expression of desires» (*Blindness*, p. 9), tropes are precisely the way in which the seduction of general metaphors find its way to, be it mediated, expression: tropes are the expression of the seductive desire for general referentially reliable metaphors. Even if one suspects their nonreferential, illusory status, «with the reintroduction of needs,» says de Man, «the relapse into the seductions of metaphor is inevitable» (*Allegories*, p. 210). In other words we have, on the one hand, the illusory status of general metaphors, and the knowledge of this status and, on the other hand, the human need for these general

⁶ De Man repeats the same concept in an interview: «There is no entity that can be defined as man. Therefore, there is necessarily in the history of this undefinable entity, *man*, an undefinable fictional, fantastic element» (Robert Moynihan, *Interview with Paul de Man*, «Yale Review», n. 73 (1984), p. 597).

⁷ As de Man points out, metaphor (that can recur to a language beyond logic and referentiality) is «a language of desire» (*Allegories*, p. 47). On the links between metaphor and desire see also *Blindness and Insight*, p. 9, and the powerful essay by Joel Fineman *The Structure of Allegorical Desire*, in *Allegory and Representation. Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1979-80*, Stephen J. Greenblatt (ed.), Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1981, pp. 26-60. Interestingly enough, Nietzsche too connects the idea of need (or absence, or lack) with tropes. In his notes on rhetoric he quotes Cicero and he argues that the original cause of the birth of tropes is (linguistic as well as material) penury (p. 123).

metaphors; hence the fallacious coexistence of our more or less conscious awareness of their inconsistency, and at the same time our need for the illusion. Second, de Man points out that also writers are not outside this situation of error and division. The authors, too, are divided: in Rousseau's case, between two opposite drives, the competing attractiveness of politics and literature — a division that somehow parallels the division between our need for general metaphors and our awareness of their nonreferentiality: «If one asserts that Rousseau always remained tempted by the ethics of political reform and by the seductions of the novel, then he failed to make up his mind although he was able to articulate clearly the necessity for the choice» (*Allegories*, p. 192). The essay on Rousseau, compared to the one on Rilke, reaches further, to a deeper and wider level of theoretical complexity. Here the concept of seduction is used by de Man in order to create a kind of *vue en abîme*. In this case, in fact, there is not only the seduction by Rousseau of readers and the double seduction suffered by Rousseau by politics and literature, but also the «seductive strategy» of the novel's characters themselves. The essay is particularly challenging because it takes on other works by Rousseau in addition to *Julie*: «the *Second Discourse* and [...] the *Essay*», writes de Man, «are deconstructive narratives aimed at metaphorical seductions» (*Allegories*, p. 200). Furthermore, while we had in Rilke seduction by euphony (the pleasing sound of certain words), in Rousseau we have seduction by the signifier itself (the acoustic dimension, whether pleasing or not, of every word).

In the eleventh chapter of *Allegories of Reading* (pp. 246-277), *Promises*, another chapter on Rousseau, de Man focuses again on the seductive power of the acoustic dimension of literary language in the *Social Contract*. The purpose of the essay is again to deconstruct, by means of a rigorous rhetorical reading, the apparent natural and presumably certain referential status of general metaphors such as «love», «man», and «judgment» (p. 247). In this chapter the deconstructed metaphors, such as «individual» or «society» (p. 248), concern especially politics. The scholar uses a fascinating example to demonstrate his argument, i.e. the referential unreliability of general political metaphors: he considers the dialectical and absolutely conventional relation between a belonging, in this case a portion of land, and its owner (p. 262). In modern societies, writes de Man, the first element cannot be dissociated from the second. At a certain point, they end to be identified as the same thing, even though there is no such a thing as a *natural* relation of property between owner and land. Proust for instance seems often fascinated, as de Man points out, by the names of the aristocrats he meets: these names identify or indicate villages, lands, and areas loved by the narrator (to the point that one cannot separate the name of the land from the name of its actual or former aristocrat owner). This phenomenon reaches a point in which the names of actual individuals and the names of places are or seem to be the same thing: there is a kind of powerful even if not logically motivated metonymy. Nevertheless in Proust too there cannot be a natural, spontaneous and legitimate identification between owner and land: the illusion of a natural identification between man and ground invariably hides the true, politico-economic and therefore conventional dimension of a relationship of property. Like euphony in Rilke, so metonymy in Rousseau and in Proust seduces readers and hides the problematic, if not negative, side of the text — e.g. the arbitrariness of whatever connection between word and thing, in this case the arbitrariness of the relationship between the land and its name, the land and its owner — with beautiful appearances. De Man writes:

There can be no more seductive form of onomastic identification. The fascination of the model is not so much that it feeds fantasies of material possession [...] but that it satisfies

semiological fantasies about the adequacy of sign to meaning seductive enough to tolerate extreme forms of economic oppression. (*Allegories*, p. 262)

Perhaps these words might help to shade light upon some of the most problematic issues that animated the long debate, after de Man's death, on his ambiguous past as a Nazi supporter. It is quite easy, maybe too easy, to interpret these words by connecting them to the scholar's past, and with his denial of his past, which seem to be a perfect example of how the seduction of language can hide and overcome even the most terrible form of, not only economic, oppression.⁸

However the tension (which all de Man's readers know very well) between the referential and the figurative dimension of language, can be compared to the tension between the seductiveness and the rationality of language. The opposition between seduction (rhetoric, figurality, literature) and rationality (logic, grammar, referent) seems to derive from the anthropological tension between body and mind. The author states this idea in an essay written at the end of the 70s on Pascal, *Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion*, now collected in the posthumous book *Aesthetic Ideology* (p. 51-69). He writes:

Though man is accessible to reason and convinced by proof, he is even more accessible to the language of pleasure and of seduction, which governs his needs and his passions rather than his mind. In their own realms, the language of seduction . . . and the language of persuasion can rule or even cooperate, but when natural truth and human desire fail to coincide, they can enter into conflict. (*Aesthetic*, p. 54)

De Man sees the same tension between the seductiveness of rhetoric and the rationality of proof in Pascal's *Réflexions*: «The first is the language of truth and of persuasion by proof, the second the language of pleasure [...] and of persuasion by usurpation or seduction. [...] Even in the transcendental realm of revealed language in Holy Writ, the necessary choice between *seduction* and *truth* remains undecidable» (*Aesthetic*, p. 69, emphasis added).

The friction between mind and body, along with other similar dyadic tensions such as those between rationality and seduction, sensual pleasure and natural truth, proof and passion, constative and performative language, belongs to a classical tradition in the history of Western thought,⁹ and de Man certainly enriches this tradition with his original contribution. According to the scholar, this kind of oppositions lies at the very core of language, in which referential data and tropological constructions fail to coincide. The shifting and random instability of psychic human needs and the rigid symmetry of grammatical patterns oscillate between nonconvergence and open opposition. In this respect, de Man seems not far from French poststructuralist theories, especially those of

⁸ Significantly, in *Allegory of Reading (Profession de foi)*, the particular important (since it gives the title to the entire collection of essays) essay on Rousseau de Man states that «Aberrations of moral judgment are a consequence of epistemological and rhetorical indeterminations» (p. 241). On these issues see especially the two completely different perspectives of Jacques Derrida (*Mémoires, pour Paul de Man*, Galilée, Paris, 1988) and Paul Morrison (*The Poetics of Fascism. Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, pp. 109-145).

⁹ In the Middle Ages — for example in Dante's *Paradiso*, VIII — Venus, the goddess of seduction and pleasure, was associated with Rhetoric (see Earl G. Schreiber, *Venus in the Medieval Mythographic Tradition*, «Journal of English and Germanic Philology», n. 74 (1975), pp. 519-535). Is de Man implicitly, or unconsciously, quoting this famous tradition?

Foucault in *Les Mots et les choses*,¹⁰ which strategically links Saussure's arbitrariness of the signifier¹¹ with Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics and insists on the inescapable separation and noncoincidence between words and things in language. The notion of literature as the realm of nonreferentiality, or more precisely as the culmination of the experience of the noncommunication between word and world, is a *topos* of poststructuralism that one can find in all the protagonists of this critical movement. De Man's seduction of rhetoric is, after all, the seduction of the illusory natural coincidence between word and thing: metaphors, such as «state,» «man,» or «love,» and literary artifices, such as euphonies and evocative images, draw readers aside (in Latin *seducere* means to draw aside) from the vertiginous, almost unbearable negative truth of the noncoincidence of language and reality.¹² Together with irony and allegory, those «more or less synonymous key-words»¹³ of de Man's critical lexicon, seduction seems to express the gap between word and thing: in the a-pathetic, post-Romantic critical readings of the scholar, irony allegory and seduction are the main paths toward the analysis of the voids and the aporias of language. Nevertheless the scholar's concept of seduction seems to have in itself both a pathetic nuance and an ambiguous positive nature: if there is seduction, illusion, falsehood, there must be a place from which someone is drawn aside, namely the *true* nonreferential nature of language (especially in literature). If someone is drawn aside, this someone must feel the nostalgia, the pathos of the distance, of the place lost. No more apathetic indecision and suspension, as is typical in de Man and in poststructuralist criticism, but an (ide-

¹⁰ De Man quotes Foucault several times in *Allegories of Reading*. In particular, in the essay on metaphor (*Second Discourse*), de Man refers to the Foucault's notion of «discours classique» (that is, the referential illusion of a direct coincidence between words and things) and applies it to Rousseau (pp. 147-148). Various analogies can be found also between Demanian notion of «seduction» and Foucault's notion of «attirance» (attraction). See Foucault's 1966 article on Blanchot, *La pensée du dehors* (published by the French review «Critique» in which de Man too has published during the 50s and the 60s) now collected in the posthumous *Dits et écrits* (Daniel Defert and François Ewald (eds.), Gallimard, Paris, 1994), where «attirance» is a kind of intimate element of structuration of different aesthetic and philosophical systems: «L'attirance est pour Blanchot ce qu'est, sans doute, pour Sade le désir, pour Nietzsche la force, pour Artaud la matérialité de la pensée, pour Bataille la transgression» (p. 525).

¹¹ The notion is explained by Saussure in the *Cours de linguistique générale* (4th ed. Payot, Paris, 1949, pp. 100-102) and repeated (maybe in an easier way) in several private notes and letters. For instance, in a private note, Saussure writes: «Le langage et l'écriture ne sont *pas fondés* sur un rapport naturel des choses. Il n'y a aucun rapport, à aucun moment, entre un certain son sifflant et la forme de la lettre S, et de même il n'est pas plus difficile au mot *cow* qu'au mot *vacca* de désigner une vache» (quoted in Tullio De Mauro, *Notizie biografiche e critiche su F. De Saussure*, Postfazione a Ferdinand de Saussure, *Corso di linguistica generale*, Italian translation by Tullio De Mauro, Laterza, Roma, 1999, p. 328). For the classical and medieval roots of the contemporary debate on the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, see Jesse M. Gellrich's *Allegory and Materiality: Medieval Foundations of Modern Debate*, «The Germanic Review», n. 77 (2002), pp. 146-159, especially page 151 on Augustine.

¹² Nevertheless, the suspension of referentiality in de Man seems to be less radical, or at least more problematic, than in structuralist and poststructuralist scholars such as Barthes, Todorov, or Genette. See, for instance, *Allegories*, p. 49 or the first essay of *The Resistance to Theory* (pp. 3-20) or the last essay of *Blindness and Insight, Lyric and Modernity* (pp. 166-185) especially page 182, where the author states that even in a poet like Mallarmé is impossible to forget completely the mimetic, referential, or representational function of poetry. For de Man's severe opposition to structuralism see Lindsay Water's *Paul de Man: Life and Works*, Introduction to Paul de Man, *Critical Writings. 1953-1978*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1989, p. LXXI.

¹³ Christopher Norris, *De Man Unfair to Kierkegaard? An Allegory of (Non)-Reading*, in *(Dis)continuities: Essays on Paul de Man*, cit., p. 208.

alistic?) polarization between Truth, that is, the totally arbitrary nature of language, and Falsehood, that is, the illusory seduction of the referential coincidence between word and thing.¹⁴

According to Ronald Schleifer, the notion of seduction in de Man describes the «no-opposition of the difference between body and word,» i.e. the fact that language creates «bodily responses (such as fear, or passion, or distrust, or even anxiety)» (p. 230). Yet it is not clear, in de Man, whether this seductive power is something that language exercises by itself, independently from the intention of the writer or speaker, or if it is something that the speaker or writer can manage, consciously and intentionally deciding whether to use it or not (or maybe a mix of the two possibilities).¹⁵ In fact, Schleifer too, perhaps in contradiction with what I quoted before, points out that de Man stresses that our reflection on language is affected by ignorance, e.g. «the impossibility of truly understanding what *one* is doing with language, what *language itself* could possibly do» (p. 231, emphasis added). It seems difficult to escape from this dyadic opposition, whether to consider the whole language as autonomously seductive or whether to consider the particular language of a particular writer as seductive. One should also make some more clear distinction about what one should consider as language: is one dealing with language as the whole verbal communication, either spoken or written, or just with the language of literary texts? At first sight, one would think that the scholar specifically stresses the autonomy of the figural dimension of language within literary text, which would escape any kind of control, including the intention of the writer. Yet it is possible to quote passages in which he stresses, on the one hand, the intentional use of figural language, and on the other the fact that this seductive language exists and can be used also in other kind of verbal activity, not necessarily literary nor written. For instance, in an essay on *The Epistemology of Metaphor* de Man states: «What [...] in language [...] renders it nebulous and obfuscating: it is, in a very general sense, the figurative power of language. This power includes *the possibility of using* language seductively and misleadingly in discourses of persuasion» (*Aesthetic*, p. 35, emphasis added). Thus it seems unclear whether language itself has, in literature, the ability to organize rhetorical structures that seduce readers with an illusory, reassuring referential status, or whether the speaker or the poet (the novelist, the dramatist, the philosopher and so on) cleverly organizes the language he or she uses in order to seduce readers. In an interview de Man says: «Tropes have a consistency: tropological movements are not wild; they are systematic, or *systemic*, one would say — that is, they engender systems. As such, they have consistency, and their power as well as their seduction is their coherence».¹⁶ (In this case (and incidentally one should notice his use of those words «power» and «seduction»), it looks as if the tropes themselves organize themselves in order to seduce readers: the figural language has seductive power, not the writer. Quoting a poem by Rilke (*Ich liebe dich, du sanftestes Gesetz*), de Man writes: «*The mastery of the poem* consists in its control over the phonic dimensions of language» (*Allegories*, p. 31, emphasis added). Notice that he attributes the mastery to «the poem,»

¹⁴ On the notion of truth see de Man's 1953 article on Montaigne, *Montaigne and Transcendence*, now collected in *Critical Writings 1953-1978* (pp. 3-11). Philip Buyck approaches this issue by criticizing de Man's reading of Nietzsche on rhetoric: whereas Nietzsche seems to conceive rhetoric only as persuasion, de Man is interested in «the question of truth or falsehood» in rhetoric (p. 156).

¹⁵ A very similar accusation is formulated by de Man against Stanley Fish's *Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics* (*Blindness and Insight*, p. 287).

¹⁶ Robert Moynihan, *Interview with Paul de Man*, cit., p. 591.

not to Rilke. Nevertheless, after few pages, de Man writes: «One should [...] draw attention to the detailed precision in Rilke's selection of metaphorical analogons» (*Allegories*, p. 35). In this case Rilke the poet is the responsible for the linguistic «selection,» for the high formal and aesthetic level of his work.

However, the scholar — in perfect agreement with the deconstructive, but also formalist, structuralist and semiotic theoretical tradition — seems generally more disposed to reduce the role of the author in literature: rhetoric, and the seduction that rhetoric causes, appears as an autonomous drive within language. In fact, it is possible to find other theoreticians, including some that were very important for de Man, writing about the connection between language and seduction, with no reference to seduction as a power intentionally or consciously used by somebody.¹⁷ For instance, in an article on Emmanuel Levinas, *Violence et Métaphysique*, collected in his 1967 book *L'écriture et la différence*, Derrida writes about «une langue s'accusant elle-même d'un pouvoir de séduction don't elle joue sans cesse» (p. 122).¹⁸ Language («langue») itself seems in this case to have the ability to act seductively, or better, the seductiveness of rhetoric is already within language, being one of its effects. In fact, de Man too writes: «Instead of conceiving of the poem's rhetoric as the instrument of the subject, of the object, or of the relationship between them, it is preferable to reverse the perspective and to conceive of these categories as standing in the service of the language that has produced them» (*Allegories*, p. 37).¹⁹ Nonetheless, in original opposition with the mainstream poststructuralist topos of the arbitrariness of the sign and of nonreferentiality of literature, the scholar does not think it is possible to escape from the traditional subject-object relationship and from referentiality: «The notion of a language entirely freed of referential constraints is properly inconceivable. Any utterance can always be read as semantically motivated, and from the moment understanding is involved the positing of a subject or an object is unavoidable» (*Allegories*, p. 49).

Within de Man's work the nonreferential nature of literature is perhaps another metaphor, another trope that evokes the figural function of literary language as a disruption between grammar, as an ingenuous solidification of meaning, and rhetoric, as a more refined suspension or circulation of meaning. The core of the scholar's thought on literature consists in the assumption that all texts are organized around a system of tropes. To read and to analyze a text is to stress its figurality and therefore to generate

¹⁷ Together with Heidegger and Nietzsche, these are probably among the most quoted authors in de Man's works. One should also consider that at the time in which de Man wrote *Allegories of Reading*, in 1979, several other scholars were working on the theme of seduction. Probably the most famous are the works by Jean Baudrillard, *De la seduction*, Denoël, Paris, 1979; and by Shoshana Felman, *Le Scandale du corps parlant. Don Juan avec Austin ou La séduction en deux langues*, Seuil, Paris, 1980. Both books show various similarities with de Man's collection (de Man is quoted two times in Felman's book: pp. 132, 185). Both Felman and Baudrillard use the metaphor of the mirror (and thus the metaphor of seduction) in order to stress the self-reflexive nature of seduction and the self-reflexive (or nonreferential) nature of language as well. The idea of seduction seems to be a veritable fashion in poststructuralist theories of the late 70s. More recently, Michel Meyer, in his *Questions de rhétorique: langage, raison et séduction* (Librairie Générale Française, Paris, 1993) focuses on the relationship between language and seduction under a rhetorical perspective.

¹⁸ Similar words can be found in an article on Blanchot, whose «geste philosophique,» writes Derrida «nous séduit» (p. 259), in an article on Artaud where the «séduction» is compared to the «représentation théâtrale» (p. 347), and in other parts of *L'écriture et la différence*.

¹⁹ McQuillan (p. 41) shows others examples in which de Man seems to conceive the author (subject) as totally dependent and passive and language (rhetoric) as the only, autonomous, active principle.

another text, that is, to organize another system of tropes that deconstructs the first one but can be deconstructed one more time by means of another tropological system, and so on and so forth in an endless chain. This process leads to «unreadability» and to «undecidability» as the final stages of all critical activity, which can no longer be distinguished from literature, because both participate of the same figural dimension. It seems that de Man's text itself cannot escape this self-corrosive process: as the critics analyzed in *Blindness and Insight*, blinded by their own theoretical insight and in semiconscious but critically fertile contradictions with their own theoretical positions, de Man too appears blinded by his own notion of seduction. As Eduardo Saccone (showing some theoretical contradictions in de Man's reading of Rousseau) points out: «Alcune affermazioni di De Man possono prestarsi facilmente a equivoci (probabilmente perchè non pensate fino in fondo, vale a dire sistematicamente, o forse proprio perchè, come previsto, neppure il suo testo può sfuggire ai suoi momenti di cecità).²⁰ In fact, de Man uses the word «seduction» as a metaphor to show the seductive result of rhetoric on readers, but he is, so to speak, seduced by his own metaphor, the effects of which he cannot fully master. Moreover, he seems perfectly aware of this both tragic, ironic and shifting circularity that makes rhetorically aware critical reading — or one should say deconstructive reading, or more precisely, Demanian reading — impossible (or maybe better, highly self-contradictory even though highly rigorous).²¹ «Deconstruction of figural texts», writes de Man, perhaps self-critically, «engender lucid narratives which produce, in their turn and as it were within their own texture, a darkness more redoubtable than the error they dispel» (*Allegories*, p. 217).

²⁰ «Some of de Man's statements can be easily questionable (perhaps because not fully meditated, that is not systematically articulated, or perhaps precisely because, as foreseen, neither his text can escape to its moments of blindness» (Eduardo Saccone, *Pratica e teoria della lettura*, Foreword to Paul de Man, *Allegorie della lettura*, Italian translation by Eduardo Saccone, Einaudi, Torino, 1997, p. 30).

²¹ Georges Bataille (*La littérature et le mal* 1957, *L'impossible* 1962), a close friend of Blanchot and another of the authors who influenced de Man's thought, characterized critical reading as «impossible». Interestingly enough, in his *L'expérience intérieure* (Gallimard, Paris, (1954) 1997), Bataille establishes a link between the unknown («l'inconnu») and seduction (p. 160).